

# Thanks for Snakes

By Frederick Boyce

Someone suggested that I make the theme of the November article “Giving Thanks for Snakes,” so just to get things rolling and see if I could maybe find a few ideas beyond the most obvious ones, I did a Google search for “Reasons to be Thankful for Snakes.” The first thing that came up was something like: “Thanksgiving—Time to be Thankful that Snake Season is Over!” Ouch!

Well, that rather sums up much of my life right there, being on a different page than the bulk of humanity on this issue—but I really can’t change what I know from firsthand experience to be true, nor would I want to. And what



An elderly black racer allows itself to be cradled gently by the author.—Photo by Amanda Goble

I know to be true is that snakes are truly fantastic beasts—marvelous, lithe, graceful, colorful and, despite having the same basically limbless form, incredibly diverse animals with nearly 3,500 species being grouped

into over 20 families. They have done an exquisite job of adapting their very simple design to every habitat on earth, except for the very coldest regions and a few islands.

Snakes live in mountains and coastlands, trees and caves, swamps and rivers, deserts and oceans. They are all predators, and the majority of them tend to prey upon things that are not really our friends and which definitely do not have our best interests at heart. As long as humans have practiced agriculture, we have been laboring to cultivate and store enormous amounts of food for . . . rodents.

Rodents not only move in and eat our food, they despoil what they do not eat and spread harmful, even deadly, diseases such as Hantavirus, Lyme disease and the bubonic plague. Far more people have fallen victim to rodent-borne diseases than to venomous snakebite. My father was very protective of the large black rat snakes on our farm, as he knew they were basically smart, self-propelled and highly motivated mouse traps, which not only dispatched destructive rodents but got rid of them entirely, turning them into very high-quality fertilizer. Rodents can quickly learn to avoid traps or poison baits, but snakes, their ancient and implacable adversaries, are relentless in their pursuit and, unlike cats, are able to follow rodents right down their tunnels or between walls and wipe out entire nests.

Snakes do not destroy property, nor do they alter the environment. They live very gently on the earth, making use of shelter opportunistically rather than constructing their own. The pine snake of the sandhills is the only one of our

native snakes to actually dig a burrow, which the mother snake creates in order to lay and guard her eggs.

My own mother always claimed that our house was never broken into because it was widely known to be “full of snakes.” Indeed, my older brother had it well stocked with snakes (and other creatures) by the time I came along, so I never saw them as being creepy or scary or indeed any different from other animals. I may have been in kindergarten before I began to realize that most people did not live in houses that were “full of snakes.”

I am thankful for all the great stories they provided, such as the time our pet boa constrictor escaped while I was at school and disrupted my mother’s bridge club (which was constantly being disrupted at our house because of some sort of animal), or the time my mother bent down to pick up what she thought was one of my father’s shoelaces that turned out to be a baby corn snake. It came alive in her hand and sent her screaming up the bed-post, even though she



Lockhart Boyce, brother of the author, holding a large eastern diamondback rattlesnake at Serpent City, c. 1973.

—Photo by Don Alford

was generally quite tolerant of snakes when not caught off-guard. She had a very sensitive nose and therefore was not fond of having small mammals or birds in the house, but snakes are virtually odorless when well cared for, so they appealed to her greatly. Conversely, a monkey that my brother brought home was evicted after only one day.

As for my brother, he worked his way through college performing live rattlesnake milking shows at various road-side attractions, such as Serpent City in Myrtle Beach, in the early 1970s (a different era for sure), and eventually

graduated first in his class from the University of Georgia Veterinary School. He was always quick to thank rattlesnakes for his education and subsequent career in veterinary medicine and could also be thankful that he was never once bitten, though he had handled and squeezed venom from thousands of them. In fact, there are countless people working in the sciences, not just herpetology, but in all of the natural science fields, as well as in medicine, who started out keeping a pet snake or two (or perhaps many) as a child. Children are naturally fascinated by these mysterious “forbidden” creatures, and as such, snakes (and other

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